

# Top Organizational Shifts

**We are changing -- with more to come. Here's the start.**

## **#1. AF needs to shift from a focus on increasing diversity to boldly leading for racial equity.**

- **What has been:** We got too comfortable with the significantly increased diversity of our school teams and incremental improvements in “inclusion.” We have been too blind to the role that racism and implicit bias have played inside our organization, including in our approach to the student experience (school culture and instruction) and in leadership hiring/promotion. As a result, leaders in some of the areas that most significantly impact the student experience are disproportionately white (e.g., Team Super, Team T&L, Team School Culture, etc.), and white dominant culture permeates our organization and impacts our decision-making. These gaps -- and the feeling that discussing them is “off limits” -- have significantly eroded trust and prevent us from being better for our kids and families.
- **What is changing.**
  - We are committing to pursuing racial equity and officially making it an AF value.
  - All senior leaders (C-Levels and Regional Superintendents) started work with an external trainer to deepen awareness of systemic racism, white dominant culture, and how they impact leadership, decision-making, and organizational culture. We will continue this training as a part of the ongoing learning and development of all senior leaders.
  - Our superintendents did a listening tour with our principals that ended with specific, public commitments around what they need to do differently in order to lead with equity and inclusiveness.
  - We are explicitly re-examining our vision for student culture and experience (see below) with a racial equity lens.
  - Our Principal -in-Residence recruitment and principal selection process has changed dramatically - including multiple ways to guard against bias and address patterns of inequity. As a result, the racial inequity that existed in accessing the principal role has virtually been eliminated--- in the last two years over 50% of new principals identify as BLM (up from 25% 4 years ago). We plan to apply the learnings from the PIR program to improve the selection process for regional superintendent. This year, we overhauled the selection process for superintendent and shared it transparently with all principals.
- **What must and WILL change.**
  - The under-representation of Black and Latinx leaders on the Cabinet and Team Super must - and will - change. We know we are a weaker network so long as we do not have adequate diversity at the senior most levels of our network.

- Having more diversity, by itself, will not create the change we need if we don't change some of the ways we behave. As we seek to create a racial equity culture, all senior leaders must be the true owners and champions of that work on a day to day basis. We must invite honest conversations about race and model consistent reflection and examination of our own role in perpetuating racial inequity through our beliefs, behaviors, practices, and policies (and then act to interrupt them). We need to ensure that equity of voice and diversity of perspective are leveraged to make our organization stronger.

**#2 AF has had too low of a bar for school culture for too long, and we need to act urgently and intentionally to create the empowering student experience our scholars deserve.**

- **What has been:** We've led from fear and lack of trust based on a time in our network when many of our schools were unsafe and unproductive for kids. Measuring time on task during the first six weeks of school is not the same as a vision for warm, affirming, joyful schools where we have high expectations and deep care for scholars and their performance. Our values should be rooted in love and the belief that every single AF kid deserves to have an exceptional student experience where they are known, loved, challenged, and excited to be at school.
- **What is changing:**
  - We are redefining our values -- for adults and for scholars -- so that they can drive our priorities and vision. And we can all unite around them.
  - We have adopted a new 5-year vision that centers around *great teaching fueling an exceptional student experience*.
  - We are recruiting new school culture leadership (literally - we're hiring a new VP of Student Experience) to lead AF in this important work.
  - We are collecting student motivation/investment data in every school in our network (and we have work to do to differentiate appropriately by academy level). This data needs to rise to the top level of what we care about as a network.
  - We are listening. Over the past year, we engaged a (diverse) working group of principals to discuss changes we should pursue in school culture. Doug has met directly with NY principals and dean of students to examine school culture systems and practices with an anti-racist lens ... and this conversation is continuing with CT/RI principals and deans of students soon.
  - We are getting help. We contracted with Ramapo, <https://ramapoforchildren.org/>, to review our school culture policies and practices and make recommendations for changes. They've worked intensely with AF Crown Heights ES & MS and a few other AF schools already. We are working with Ramapo to support our PD efforts for DOSCs and others, and we will partner with them to help us better flesh out our vision of an exceptional student experience.

- We are changing NTT so that it prioritizes beliefs, warm-demanding mindsets, and authentic relationship building as a foundation from which to build management skill (school-leaders will see a list of proposed changes by 3/1)
- **What must and WILL change:**
  - We have to learn from our best schools (starting now - this year). The reality is that we have schools right now that are creating exceptional student experiences and strong academic achievement, and we haven't learned enough from them.
  - We need to hold ourselves accountable to student motivation data and make part of the AF Report Card. Results at AF happen when we set accountable goals and go after data.
  - We need to start next year (2019-2020) with a clear vision for the student experience at AF, grounded in our values and beliefs. We need warm demanding / anti-racist mindsets that are grounded in AF's new values and that inform our training and development at every level. (School leaders will be giving feedback on a draft document in the next few weeks.) We also need a clear plan for how we will address social-emotional learning at every academy level. And we need clarity about how each academy level is changing the "what" and the "how" of their school culture systems to ensure they are empowering and aligned with our new values. We are now working with academy level leads so that they can engage principals and DOSCs to keep what is working and make necessary changes to maximize our student experience.
  - We can no longer see school culture as separate from great instruction. No later than May 1, we will have two important, guiding documents ready for principal feedback: (1) a refreshed version of the AF Essentials that emphasizes conceptual learning and students independence ... this will provide the strongest vision of great instruction at AF, (2) an overview of our 5-year plan for the "academic preparation and independence" priority (including essential K-12 curriculum revisions).

**#3 It feels like there is an accountability double standard (with less accountability the higher you go in the organization). We need to be more consistently warm demanding with everyone at AF.**

- **What has been:** There is a lot of murkiness about the measures of success and support structures for our network team leaders, superintendents. It is not clear how under-performance is addressed, and there have not been clear ways to gain visibility into (and address gaps) in the DEI leadership of senior leaders.
- **What is changing:**
  - We took the unprecedented step of asking our board to hire an outside evaluator to review our decision-making regarding the October incident at AF Amistad High. This firm will issue findings, make policy and practice

recommendations, and identify whether additional consequences are required (including for us).

- We are adding superintendents' names to the AF Report Card Results and all school data will be shared/analyzed by regional supt portfolio. Moreover, regional superintendent performance metrics will align with the performance metrics of the schools that they own. In short, regional superintendents will be at least as accountable as principals for their schools' success.
- We are actively changing the culture within our senior leadership to increase the level of direct challenge and responsibility / accountability -- including the need to demonstrate growth, results, and living our values.
- Leading for Racial Equity is a required competency for all senior leaders. All 360s now include questions that explicitly address inclusive leadership so that leaders get feedback (and 'scoring') on their awareness and leadership across lines of difference.
- Regional sup managers will conduct skip-level meetings with all principals at least once a year re: regional sup performance (and more frequently if a problem is identified).
- **What must and will change:**
  - We are working with all Network teams to clearly define their top 5 performance goals and then to develop a mechanism to transparently share performance annually with principals.
  - We also need to refresh the feedback mechanisms we have across the network since the NS survey and co-CEO dinners do not appear to be surfacing the biggest pain points in a clear and timely way.

#### **#4 AF needs to shift its decision-making processes to be more inclusive process and to dial up the voices of the people closest to the work.**

- **What has been:** We have valued efficiency and speed. And, at our worst, operated with the assumption that "we" (senior leaders, no longer school-based) have the answers. As a result, some decisions have been made at the network level with limited principal and school-based voice, which is especially problematic given that most senior leadership, especially on Team Super and T&L, is still disproportionately white.
- **What is changing:**
  - We went through a year-long process to redefine our network values (that is still ongoing) with the assumption that we *could not get it right* without the voices of students, parents, every staff member, and our principals.
  - We got input from every teacher in the network during day of practice on our 5-year vision.
  - We have significantly increased the frequency that we are engaging school-leaders on any/all significant network decision making.
- **What must and WILL change:**

- We need to start with the assumption that those of us who are not in schools every day do NOT have the answer, and figure out the *regular ways* we solicit (all) teacher voice on the issues and decisions that are most important (such as 5-year plan, values, etc.).
- We (network and school leaders) have to talk directly with scholars and families to make SURE we understand exactly the impact we are having. And we need to make sure that this listening becomes a part of how we operate -- with regular Scholar Town Halls (for HS), Parent Leadership Council, and Alumni Forum structures that really work.
- We are creating a regular process that will ensure that we identify top priorities with our principals and position them to engage their whole school-teams.
- We need to modify the AF employee handbook to make sure the complaints policy is *crystal clear* for every team member, and that we have a safe and effective way for anyone to voice a serious concern.